

Submission to the Vancouver Board of Education

Presented by Charles Menzies, February 11, 2008

Tonight I am speaking as a parent plain and simple. I am a member of the District Parents Advisory Council, but tonight I speak as an individual. I am a member of the U Hill Secondary PAC executive, but tonight I speak as an individual.

Tonight I am expressing to you my personal views, my concerns, and my hopes for an education that truly meets the needs of every learner. It's a lot to ask –meeting the needs of every learning that is, but it should be the foundation stone upon which our education system is built. Unfortunately, there are many people who do not share our concern with having a public education system that meets every learner's needs.

I am a parent of two boys in high school. One is at University Hill Secondary –he is here tonight with a group of his friends and classmates. My other son attends Churchill Secondary –a school, incidentally named after a courageous 20th century leader. Our family's journey through the public education system is nearing an end. Yet, I do recall those days when my boys were little and were taking their first steps into this often confusing and at times intimidating institution called school.

As parents my wife and I –like so many of the parents of young children here tonight– were anxious for our children's well being.

What would it be like for them?

Would they be cared for?

Would they have friends at school?

Would the teachers and other adults in the school see our little boys for the people they were and would become?

Our boys began school in 1996 at Ecole Jules Quesnel. In grade two one of the boys was switched to Queen Elizabeth Elementary. They're young men today. The worries we have for them are different. But my wife and I understand how the parents of the Queen Elizabeth Annex students feel about their children's futures.

Parents always worry. We always want what is best for our children. Many of us have made important sacrifices and strong commitments to ensure that our children get the best of all possible educations. Sometimes we do over function for our children. We may try and manage every moment of their lives –especially when they are little. But through all of this they will still grow up and will become young men and women ready to step forward and take their place as contributing members of society.

There are times when we must allow that our children's best interests are served by taking a larger, more ecumenical view. There are times when it behooves us to focus on the needs of the many as opposed to the desires of the few.

Across BC school boards have been confronting the combined problems of declining enrolments, provincial government regulations, and demographic change. Each of these problems places a particular constraint upon what you, as Trustees and District Management, can do.

- Declining enrolments contribute to an overall decrease in funding. As student numbers fall, so goes the money.
- Provincial regulations since 2002 favour consolidation of facilities and the rationalization of service delivery. That is, fewer, bigger buildings, and streamlining programs to take advantage of shared support services (this is not, of course, in-and-of-itself a bad thing).
- Changing demographics leads to demand for schools in some areas, declining demand in others, and increased desires for choice programs which in themselves contribute to competition between school programs. As a stakeholder rep to committee III I have seen an increase in proposals for special programs that reflect the drive toward the competitive acquisition of students.

This is not news to you. It's what you and your district management team have been struggling with for some time now. Across our province school boards have responded very much as you are now.

In Nanaimo, Prince Rupert, Coquitlam –to name only three districts- Boards of Education are in process to close some schools (often with enrolments of between 80 and 150 students) in order to reallocate their resources and rebuild facilities to meet the changing needs of their students

These are never easy decisions to make. One must assume the good intentions of those who are proposing the plans and who are making the decisions. If it hasn't been said before, we should all say it now, we appreciate your commitment to our children.

You will hear this evening, as you have been hearing since January 10th, about all of the special and wonderful things that are happening at each of the schools in the area west of Dunbar. You will also hear of the real needs for rebuilding at University Hill Elementary and Secondary schools. You will hear about the need for seismically upgrading Ecole Jules Quesnel and Queen Mary School.

I would like you to consider the opportunities that these proposals contain. I urge you to proceed with your plans. Be mindful of the families who are concerned. Allow them the time to adapt. Perhaps a solution will land at our feet and you will avoid a difficult decision. I hope so –for everyone's sake. But while we can hope, we must work with what we have. We must start rebuilding our schools now.

Appendix A: Time to Rebuild our Schools –Letter to the Media

Posted on <http://www.npweblog.ca>, February 10th, 2008.

In the educational facilities review discussion ongoing in Vancouver it's a shame that the discussion is being turned from educational needs of our children to a focus on UBC's role as developer. UBC is cast as in someway being negligent by creating much needed and relatively affordable places for people to live. In other parts of the city such actions are lauded. But not west of Blanca.

UBC has developed housing that reduces commuting, 'eco-densifies' the neighbourhood, and provides important social amenities to community members (are community is rich and diverse. We are students, families, new immigrants, UBC employees, and many other people who find living in a sustainable environment a plus). As with any large institution there are lots of things to complain about -however, in terms of working toward schools west of Blanca, UBC has been doing as much or more than any other developer in the lower mainland. We might productively ask why developers are not obliged to do more and pay for the social impacts that their developments cause, but to place all of that responsibility upon UBC is to allow the VSB and the provincial government to evade their responsibilities.

Last year the VSB submitted a proposal, developed by UBC Properties Trust, to the provincial government. Apparently the plan involved UBCPT financing the renovation and construction costs for a rebuilt high school west of Blanca. The lease agreement between UBC and VSB would have allowed VSB to pay back these costs amortized over 25 or 30 years. The provincial government is said to have rejected that arrangement.

It's too bad that our provincial government refused to accept an arrangement that would have solved our school needs over a year ago. If they'd picked up the ball we wouldn't be in the current crisis.

The situation for the 1,500-school aged and 680 preschool children living west of Blanca is serious. The two neighbourhood schools can only take in about 1100 of the children living here. Is it the fault of these children that the adults haven't done anything for close to ten years? Should these children be made to pay the price of the inaction of adults? While adults bicker and call for moratoriums on the rebuilding of our schools hundreds of children -who are part of the Vancouver School District- are being deprived of their neighbourhood school.

The VSB plan is not perfect, but it is a plan that will put children into schools in their community. It will disrupt a few dozen children whose school is to be closed. This is never a happy thing to do. With care and good will any disruption can be minimized. We can always hope and pray for a miracle that will meet the needs of the many and the desires of the few. But, in the meantime it is time that we stopped blaming and started building. **Our kids deserve that.**

Appendix B: Speaking with one voice

Posted on <http://www.npweblog.ca>, February 9th, 2008.

There comes a point in almost any struggle, organization (or family for that matter) when, at the heat of the moment, a conciliatory voice will say we need to find common ground and speak with the same voice. The assumption seems to be that differences of opinion and divergences of perspective are distractions. Distractions that will ultimately lead to intensified conflict (or, in the terms of a political organization, weakness).

It is very nice, in the abstract, to say people need to speak with the same voice. It makes a sort of common sense. One might even suggest that it allows us to sweep under the carpet distasteful aspects of conflict for a common good.

But is it really possible to speak with one voice? What does it mean? What is the cost of reducing everything to the lowest common denominator so that every one can speak with the same voice? I hear this sentiment often in my professional research into aboriginal title and rights. But in my professional work it is usually a privileged non-aboriginal community, organization, business, or government that suggest that one should speak with a common voice, find a common perspective. Suggestions from the aboriginal community that their rights have been denied or that the services they are receiving are sub-par are met with calls to try not to be divisive, to not cause conflict, to not pit communities against each other. Of course, that's a different story and doesn't directly compare to the question as to whether or not families living west of Blanca face an inequitable allocation of public resources.

The current problem of the EFR is a classic dilemma. Within the current context if voice 'a' gets what it wants voice 'b' doesn't. Voices 'a' and 'b' can both agree that some external force is to blame and that each other both deserve what they want. But, unless something changes there is no way to speak with one voice, unless one party wishes to subsume their immediate interests so that the interests of the other can be supported.

We can certainly agree, as I think many of us did at the representational meeting last Thursday, that there is a real and pressing need in our school district for students living west of Blanca. We can also agree that seismic upgrades are critical and need to be dealt with. That's the easy part. What is far harder to find common ground on is the mechanism to achieve these agreed to objectives.

It's what parents and community members living west of Blanca have been struggling, lobbying, arguing, praying for, for close to six years now.

I think it is fair to say that ideally and in the abstract every currently existing school and piece of school property should be held onto. We don't, however, live in an ideal or an abstract world. We live in the here and now and have to make decisions under conditions not of our own choosing.

Appendix C: Open Letter to Clarence Hansen, Chair VSB

Posted on <http://www.npweblog.ca>, February 3rd, 2008.

Dear Mr. Hansen,

I would like to convey to you some of my thoughts and concerns that have emerged as the public process of consultation has developed these past few weeks. I would also like to convey to you my personal perspective on the importance of rebuilding our schools as is described in the EFR phase 1 document.

There has been much discussion and commentary within our communities and in the various public media. As this discussion has proceeded the public face of the issue appears to have become a story about 'what will happen to a small westside annex as a result of the intransigence of a large corporate institution (UBC) combined with bureaucracy locked into a faulty process (VSB). Yet, such a representation is not supported in the empirical facts of the situation.

From my perspective, and that of many of the other parents I know in this area, the issue is about two very important issues: the need to rebuild our schools, and the lack of capital funding to do what needs to be done.

It is clear to those of us who have made the commitment to live in the new residential areas on Point Grey that the University has gone a long way toward making the rebuilding of our schools possible. We can, as always hope for more from the university, but to wait for a miracle would be to place the needs of many, many young children and families at risk of a further disruption to their education.

As adults wrangle over words and sentences in arcane planning documents our children are growing up. My own boys will not have the opportunity to attend the long sought after rebuilt school, even if it is put in place at the earliest date implied. We need the school out here and what I hear when I walk through my neighbourhood is that it's time to start rebuilding.

Perhaps a few words about the community that makes up the student population at the two U Hill Schools would be of some interest. In terms of demographics you will already know that both schools are at the limit of their enrolment capacity. According to the BC Statistics census tract data for the UBC/UEL area there are 1545 school age children (6 to 17 years of age) living in our community. There are an additional 680 children living in this area under the age of 6. The overall population in this area has increased by nearly 40% since the 2001 census (see previous post for data). This compares with a next to nil population increase in the surrounding census tract areas (i.e. Dunbar and West Tenth areas immediately adjacent to the UEL).

It is difficult to make the decision to close any school for any reason. I would personally prefer that some other source of funding be found as opposed to the proceeds of a small school. However, if waiting for new money or new mechanisms means losing the

opportunity to rebuild our schools then I do not believe that is the reasonable and prudent thing to do. We need to start Rebuilding Our Schools and we need to do it sooner rather than later.

Some have asked which school might be next? Perhaps we should ask which student must stand in line for the bus, which students must sit in a seismically unsound building, . . . Not as elegant a slogan, but more in tune with the reality of the need to rebuild our schools. Our children need a proper place to go to school and learn. On behalf of 500 hundred young people without a neighbourhood school I ask that you hold the course and start rebuilding.

Yours,

Charles Menzies
Parent of a U Hill Secondary Student.

Comments posted on blog by others

So the issues are to 'rebuild our schools' and the 'the lack of capital funding to do what needs to be done.'

Yet in the end, your recommendation is that the VSB proceed with their proposal to close a public school (that is full), sell the land (to what will likely be a private school) so they can afford to build/renovate a school (in your neighbourhood).

Are you seeing the inconsistencies?

This process is forcing neighbourhoods to compete and bicker with each other. It's bad enough when those armed with less than complete knowledge wade loudly into the debate. But when it's reached the stage when someone who runs a website called "In Support of Public Education", loses so much perspective in the pursuit of a much needed school in their neighbourhood that they're prepared to advocate for the closure of a school that has flourished for 40 years and the sale of its lands rather than insist that the provincial government pay for this new school, it's really got quite ridiculous.

The provincial government must accept that capital spending on schools in this school district, per student, over the last 25 years must easily be lowest of any school district. It is unprecedented and shortsighted to close a school that is full and sell it to fund construction of another school. Short term the spaces at QEA will be needed for swing space during scheduled seismic upgrades and long term once enrolments start trending upwards again in eight years.

Why are you not insisting that existing, full schools be preserved and the Provincial government be held accountable for needed capital expenditures in growing neighbourhoods?

In Support of Public Education? Or In Support of a New School In My Neighbourhood at Any Cost?

Gregor Young

Parent of a current QEA student and two QEA grads

In response to Gregor Young's comments, I want to ask a similar question to those who defending QEA: are you defending it for children's education or my children's education at any cost?

Most parents in U-Hill catchment I know have a mixed feeling toward the current proposal. Charles Menzies' letter has reflected this feeling - that is while we want a neighborhood school, we have no intention to have this school or schools at the cost of inconvenience of other parents.

However, if all possibilities and means have been exhausted for a new school at no cost, as it appears during the past years, then we go to the bottom line of fairness and efficient using of public funds.

The thing that bothers me the most is, while QEA is a full school, the majority of the students are not living in its catchment. The school is kept full by parents who are chasing specific programs or personal preference. While they get the freedom of choice, other students are deprived from neighborhood schools.

If special programs are so important for some parents, why don't they send their children to private schools?

Public education means equal access to tax money. It further means limited resources being evenly delivered to all, and special programs should only be provided after everybody gets their essential share.

The answer to my opening question can be either way, and either is valid. However, you cannot apply one answer to a group of parents while another to other groups of parents.

If you are defending QEA for your children, then we will have the same right for ours. Let's have a vote from all parents that are affected!

If you agree we are discussing the issue for the sake of whole public education, "insisting" anything based on "existing" cannot logically be a good argument. Basic right of a whole community's children vs freedom of choice for some parents, isn't it clear which reflects more of public education?

Posted by: **Jill Lu** at February 4, 2008 5:03 PM

There is a broader issue at stake, and that is whether maintaining any of the annex schools truly represents the best use of taxpayer dollars. There seems to be a misconception that UEL residents do not pay school taxes -- they do, at the same mill rate as residents throughout the school district -- and that the proposal to sell QEA represents a "subsidy" of UEL development. The reality is that students and taxpayers throughout the district have been subsidizing those lucky enough to attend one of the annex schools for years, and none more so than those on the Endowment Lands. Were it not for the last decade's growth in the UEL more schools than QEA would be facing closure. Were it not for the resulting increase in school taxes, QEA would have ceased to be economically feasible years ago.

As it currently stands, there are four schools closer to QEA than U. Hill Elementary is to the bulk of its catchment area. Concerns about transportation or inconvenience pale in comparison to those faced by UEL residents on a daily basis. Even then, there is about a one in three chance that a student in the U. Hill catchment area will be unable to attend U. Hill due to overcrowding. This does not only affect students on the Endowment Lands; it affects those at Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth as those schools are pushed towards their capacities by out-of-catchment students. To demand that we maintain a small boutique school for the benefit of fewer than 130 students at the expense of the 1500 students attending U. Hill, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth is foolish.

I don't see any "inconsistencies" in Mr. Menzies' support for public education and his support for the VSB's plan. Of course, I don't believe that maintaining every school ever built forever is a responsible use of education dollars. Ultimately the needs of students must take precedence over everything else. Those throughout the entire Lord Byng and U. Hill families of schools, including the students currently attending QEA, are better served by the plan put forward by the VSB than by the status quo. While it is unfortunate that the Annex would be closed, it makes sense economically -- and, in the long term, on the basis of quality of education -- to do so.

Posted by: **Colin Morton** at February 6, 2008 9:13 PM

"The thing that bothers me the most is, while QEA is a full school, the majority of the students are not living in its catchment."

This statement is simply not true and has been discussed at the VSB meetings. The catchment for QEA is two-fold. As a dual-track school, it has a (very small) catchment for English students and a decidedly larger catchment for French Immersion students. All but two of the FI students, which comprise 2/3 of the school's enrollment are within the FI catchment. For the two that aren't, QEA is still the closest FI school to them geographically.

A smaller percentage, but still a majority, of the English students are in the catchment even though it's possible to live just two blocks from the school and not be within the catchment.

In other words, catchment arguments are specious at best given their poor definition and haphazard application.

Secondly, at no point has the Save QEA group expressed anything but support for the construction of a new school on campus. The only people who seem to not be pulling for both a new school on campus AND the continued operation of QEA are people on campus who are getting fearful that if QEA is saved it will be at the expense of their proposed new school. I understand that fear but it's irrational to blame parents for wanting to save a full school that has had wait lists for years.

The argument has to shift away from one coming at the expense of the other. The development plans at UBC have been known for at least ten years and been in progress for at least five. Why, in that time, was there no budgeting for a new school on campus by the VSB and Provincial government? Closing and selling a full school (and it will remain full given the demand for FI) to pay for another needed school is short sighted and does not solve the problem of meeting the overall needs of the UBC to Dunbar school area.

The financial planning, or lack of, is criminally shocking.

Posted by: **Gregor** at February 7, 2008 1:45 PM

I think that it is clear that everyone starts from the premise that rebuilding schools west of Blanca is a good idea. But that's about as far as it goes. Saying that one supports rebuilding schools but not by closing my school, in the context of the current situation, is the same as saying don't do anything at all.

There is no way any reasonable person could say that there isn't a need for schooling in Vancouver west of Blanca. Many people that I know have been saying this for years. We have spoken with the VSB. We have spoken with the MLA. We have spoken with UBC Properties Trust. We have spoken with Martha Piper when she was UBC's president. We have filmed our children's school. We have made presentations. We have even had minor victories such as the approval in principle a couple of years ago to have an addition added to the school and, while we waited to have some bathrooms repaired.

Why should children and families living west of Blanca in Vancouver be held ransom by the actions of Vancouver's developer elite? A lot of the people who benefited from developing houses in the lower mainland live in the Dunbar and Southlands area of Vancouver. Their children have their needs met in private schools. Maybe we should demand that the government cut all funding to private schools -if a person wants a private option, pay for it- but keep public funds in the public system.

The real problem is not about closing or building schools, it's the way our schools are funded by the provincial government. But you know, our children are only children once. And as Long as Ms Bond (Min. of Education) and Mr Campbell (Premier) keep to their

program the problems that we are facing from Dunbar west will repeat themselves again and again and again.

Posted by: **Charles Menzies** at February 8, 2008 12:35 PM

We have been reading the blogs for the last week or so. There is a lot of great dialogue and arguments for both sides. Does UBC need schools now? of course, no question. Does the sale of QE Annex solve the UBC situation? possibly in the short term. But, the real question at hand is it the correct solution or just a convenient fix? It seems a bandaid fix to a situation that must be addressed today because the situation at UBC is critical.

This isn't the only solution. We can't lose sight of who is the architect of this situation, the VSB and the provincial government.

We really don't disagree with each other, but we need to speak as a common voice - we can be stronger together rather than have the situation pulling us apart.

Kari & Victor

Parents of a QEA Student

Posted by: Kari & Victor at February 8, 2008 9:58 PM

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I think it is fair to say that ideally and in the abstract every currently existing school and piece of school property should be held onto. We don't, however, live in an ideal nor abstract world. We live in the here and now and have to make decisions under conditions not of our own choosing.

Posted by: **Charles Menzies** at February 8, 2008 11:29 PM

When a person is bleeding to death, you have to stop the bleeding before you sit down to find out the true cause and treat it. I don't care if the current proposal is a bandaged solution or a quick fix. As a U hill parent, I'm furious. The VSB is sitting on the problem for too long; my children don't have another 6 years to wait for you to resolve this injustice of funding allocation. I pay my property tax and should have the right to demand decent education for my kids! While some families are enjoying the luxuries of 2 English schools and 2 FI schools in their catchment to choose from, why can't my children guaranteed their spots in a neighborhood school?

Posted by: ***Wynonah Li*** at February 9, 2008 12:46 AM